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## **VR and the Dramatic Theatre: are they fellow creatures?**

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## **VR and the Dramatic Theatre: are they fellow creatures?**

This paper describes an experimental project that aims to investigate the scope of methodological and technical possibilities of using 360° videos for experiencing authored drama. In particular, it examines how a work written for the medium of theatre, with a traditional audience-drama relationship of viewer invisibility and non-participation, might translate into a viewing experience as a VR drama. The technical and dramaturgical issues arising from this are discussed. Specifically, the shared voyeuristic quality of both media is examined. Is the invisible viewer of VR drama in the invidious role of Glaucon's iniquitous shepherd Gyges, or does the medium give invisibility a cloak of aesthetic value?

Keywords: theatre; 360° video; drama; voyeurism; virtual reality, invisibility

### **The Project**

In July 2016, the two authors, practitioners and academics at Middlesex University, collaborated on a test shoot in which they filmed the 2009 short theatre play *Fellow Creature* as a 360° video piece<sup>1</sup>. This project was to take an experimental approach through practice-as-research, in order to explore the scope of methodological and technical possibilities of using 360° videos for experiencing an authored drama by one particular theatre practitioner. We wanted to see how a work written for the medium of theatre might translate into a viewing experience as a VR panorama drama. Part of this involved investigating the range of equipment and software available to us as 'prosumers'. But furthermore, we were keen to explore the aesthetic possibilities for the play in this new medium. What are its potentials as a means of producing small-scale theatrical drama? Can the theatrical convention of having a passive invisible audience member translate into the VR viewing experience? What does it mean to have an invisible, passive, voyeuristic viewer 'in the room' whilst a dramatic scene unfolds?

## **The Play**

*Fellow Creature* runs for about 20 minutes. Its story unfolds in continuous action. There are two characters – Eric and Raj – a middle-aged English man and an Indian man in his early twenties. The single setting is a hotel room in Kolkata, India. The men are both business partners and lovers. The play takes place just before an important business meeting. It begins with Raj waiting impatiently in the hotel room for Eric to return from a sightseeing walk around the city. When Eric returns he is tired and distracted. It comes out through interaction and dialogue that Eric whilst walking has come across a man dying in the street. This has raised a number of ethical questions and he no longer knows whether he can do business in a country which allows such abject poverty. Raj, through rational argument and then a seduction, attempts to persuade Eric not to worry about this dying ‘creature’. By the denouement, Eric has recovered from the disorientation caused by his temporary fit of compassion. The two men agree to incorporate charitable activity as a part of their business plan.

The play purposefully fits some of Brecht’s definitions of what he catalogued as the ‘Dramatic Theatre’ and contrasted with ‘the Epic Theatre’ (Brecht 2001, 37).

*Fellow Creature* has a story, a linear narrative, a spectator who is ‘implicated’ in the stage action, a sensational aspect, an intention to ‘involve’ the audience, a ‘sharing’ of the dramatic experience by the audience member, and an encouragement to keep an eye on how the dramatic story will play itself out to the ‘finish’. The experience of the play is, however, intended to undermine some of the more specious dichotomies that Brecht posited: the content neither encourages nor discourages the audience to commit to whether ‘man’ is evolutionarily determined or a ‘process’, it exists to leave the audience with the question of whether these characters and circumstances might or might not be ‘alterable’, it makes the audience ‘face something’ at the same time as

involving them, and again leaves for the audience the decision as to whether these people should be ‘taken for granted’ or made the ‘object’ of their ‘inquiry’. This rejection of Brecht’s famous taxonomy is deliberate on the dramatist’s part. His theatre is designed to be neither simply ‘for pleasure’ or ‘for instruction’ (Brecht 2001, 69– 77). *Fellow Creature* is part of a project to create a non-ideological, democratic, dramatic, and essentially spiritual, philosophical, and poetic theatre. For the dramatist as a practitioner, the act of transferring a play to Virtual Reality is an experiment as to how these values might work within another medium.

On stage, the work gives the viewer a voyeuristic look at the two men in the heat of a passionate argument. The interaction between Eric and Raj is intimate. The piece begins with Raj waiting in his underwear, leading, via an act of conscious seduction on Raj’s part, to a climax (an appropriate word in this context) wherein the two men rub against each other on the bed, culminating in Eric’s spasm of orgasm through frottage. This scenario is designed to encourage a feeling of prurience in the audience, in order to emphasise the play’s through-the-keyhole thematic insistence that personal desire, ethics, politics, and spiritual beliefs are intertwined; that key life decisions are made in the most intimate of encounters. The play takes advantage of the propensity of the audience to enjoy voyeurism as a part of the theatrical experience. Bentley (1966) affirms that the feeling of pleasurable guilt engendered as part of the theatre experience is an intrinsic part of the experience of modern drama, making us willing ‘peeping toms.’ More recently, Rodosthenous (2015) has edited a useful volume which acts as a compendium to thinking around the subject. In his introduction, he posits a typology of 14 differing kinds of voyeuristic theatrical experiences. In the theatre, *Fellow Creature* will usually fit Rodosthenous’s type 3, ‘Collective voyeurism’, which involves the audience sharing the voyeuristic experience within a communal audience setting, his

type 6, ‘ Emotional voyeurism’, involving scenes wherein characters are stripped emotionally naked, and his type 14, ‘Scopophilic voyeurism’ , ‘excessive interest in watching the performers in everyday (non-sexual) acts of privacy or violence’ (Rodosthenous 2015, 8). These identifiable voyeuristic elements were part of our rationale for choosing this text for our 360° test shoot. Metzl (2004) has explored the growing prevalence of voyeuristic tendencies in contemporary Western societies. Given the likelihood that VR will have a growing importance for the manufacturers and distributors of pornography (Dixon 2016 ), we saw the production of this particular text as an opportunity to experiment with one of the queasier aspects of VR, its voyeuristic propensity. Here, after all, is a medium which can bring the viewer into intimate but invisible proximity to the bodies of the performers. As a theatre play, *Fellow Creature* uses the audience’ s tendency towards voyeurism for its own artistic purposes, making it is an ideal test case for an experiment in the potentially exceptionally voyeuristic medium of VR. Rather than the viewer sitting outside of the action, as has happened in the two theatrical productions of the play, here the audience would sit in the centre of the action. Whilst we chose for the most part to use a static, centrally-placed camera, we did experiment once with a camera attached to the forehead of one of the performers. This tendency of the medium to allow the viewer to see the action from various points-of-view offers a fruitful field for future exploration, beyond the scope of this particular endeavour.

The play has been staged twice, on both occasions by the British theatre and opera director Joe Austin. At the Arcola Theatre (2009 ), it was performed in traverse, with the audience sat on two sides of the action. At the Lost Theatre (2010 ), it was performed in a more traditional, end-on proscenium arch auditorium. Both auditoria were relatively small, and on both occasions set and décor were limited to mere

suggestion of room. These are the kinds of ‘bare and simple’ (London Pub Theatres Magazine 2017) aesthetics that grow from the limitations of small-scale, fringe productions. The play was attentively received on each occasion and the intimacy of the spaces helped achieve an intensity between actors and audience. At the Arcola especially, the intimacy of the space added to the play’s voyeuristic element, bringing in another kind of theatrical voyeurism, type 11, ‘Intimate Voyeurism’, which involves the audience’s close proximity to the performer (Rodosthenous 2015, 7). On both occasions, the audience sat outside of the action and the pleasure of watching came from this outside view of an intimate and dramatically charged exchange between the two men. Both productions were put together on very small budgets, with a limited rehearsal period (a few days) and little budget for set and costume. Both were, however, accomplished ‘off the book’, with the actors having their lines learned for the performances. Both of these productions met the definition Machon (2013, 101) gives to traditional theatre performances, the ‘spectatorial theatre’, with the audience being in a static position in relation to the performers in motion.

### **Filming *Fellow Creature* in 360°**

For our first experiment in 360° filming of drama, we made a decision to preserve the stasis of the viewer. We would rehearse and stage the play as if it remained a small scale, fringe drama production. The set remained minimal. The actors rehearsed for a few days towards a performance of the play which was to be performed in a single take. The big difference is that the audience were not present during the live performance; the placement of the camera is at the centre of the drama. This places the audience inside rather than outside of the action. There is also an interesting difference between this and conventional filmmaking practice. In dramatic film practice, where direction does not usually involve any post-Brechtian or metafilmic devices which

acknowledge the presence of the crew, the crew and equipment will be kept offscreen. As this was a non-Brechtian, dramatic text we were dealing with, we did not think these practices appropriate for our purposes. We wanted to translate a dramatic fringe theatre practice to the screen. In non-VR filmic practice, the film crew will be on set with the actors and seeing the performances unfold in their presence; the director watches the entire frame of the take through a monitor. The array of cameras reveals any such crew presence within its 360° field of view. We could only monitor a sub-section of the visual field through a live feed in a room next door to the studio. These are observations which are common to other studies of practice in the field. Vlaanderen (n.d.) notes that the 360° director cannot monitor everything that is going on in front of the camera; Dooley (2017) notes the challenge of having to hide film equipment, including lighting, and crew. The issue of lighting we dealt with by adhering, again, to the values of fringe theatre production. Our audience sees the lighting rig, as we made attempted to make no secret of the fact that this was a black box studio with a lighting rig on the ceiling. Our set was not a realistic depiction of a hotel bedroom. As in much small scale, low-budget theatre, a bed and other furnishing were used to suggest the play's setting synecdochally. The entire job of maintaining the viewer's attention is given to the actors, the direction, and the writing.

The filming process is very intensive. The actors, on their own in a room with a camera, had to enact the twenty-minute scene without a break and without an audience to play off. In both productions, there was a fair bit of audience laughter in the first few minutes of the play, and the actors could feel the intensity of the audience's attention increasing as the scene unfolded – actors are acutely sensitised to audience presence. They will vary their pace and delivery to a particular crowd. They will often grow in confidence as they feel the audience warming to the piece (or the opposite, in a bad



night). Auslander (2008, 2-3) acknowledges the importance of this "energy" that can be felt between performers and audience can be important to the latter. In this circumstance, the actors only had each other to play off. In lacking a live audience, the process mirrors filmmaking conventions. However, the actors are dealing with a text written for live performance, which unfolds and builds dramatically over an extended period; most film sequences are shot in small segments. Of course, there have been experiments in extended single-shot dramatic film production, notably *Rope* (Hitchcock 1948), which is itself drawn from a theatre text. In such experiments, the bravura nature of the camera movement acts as distraction from the lack of a live audience, and part of the pleasure of viewing is in the impressive nature of the technical achievement. We wanted to see how the static camera and actors playing as if in a live situation but without an audience might pan out.

The actors had to generate a take which was (at least seemingly) line perfect each and free from mishap time. In a number of takes, the actors fluffed lines and on one occasion - in a particularly intense take which we thought was going to be "the one" - the bed collapsed. The continuous action and proliferation of cameras makes cutting between takes almost impossible, without interrupting the audience's sense of real time. We had the actors for three days rehearsal and two days filming, and whilst we got one usable take, it would have taken considerable more in terms of investment of time and resources to make a seamless 360° recording. Seamlessness was not, however, our intention. This was a test shoot to see what the potentials of the 360° medium are for telling the kinds of intense dramatic scenarios that playwrights and theatre makers create for small scale theatre productions. In this regard, both the rehearsal and filming, and subsequent viewing of the best takes, were from our point of view fruitful.

### **Technical considerations**

One of the issues we were considering is whether 360° filming and distribution offers a way for theatre makers to produce and disseminate their work in a new form to wider audiences in an affordable manner.

The demands of the medium and the current quality of the prosumer products available to record in 360° raise two issues. One is that filming material written and performed as if for the stage has potential but is time consuming and takes a degree of polish in production, which takes time. The cameras at this level of affordability do not yet afford the kind of HD viewing experience which audiences of film and television have now become accustomed to, but are able to deliver acceptable image quality at affordable prices.

For our filming, we tried four, affordable camera systems: Ricoh Theta S (Ricoh, n.d.), Giroptic 360 (Giroptic n.d.), Samsung Gear 360 (Samsung n.d.) and a GoPro rig (GoPro n.d.). These systems house between 2 and 6 cameras; they can use free or in-camera software to stitch the different views into a seamless 360 movie or still. Each system had its own advantages and disadvantages; the Ricoh Theta and Giroptic 360 were easy to use, but the image quality and stitching appeared poorer. The GoPro delivered better quality and stitching, but was less easy to use and the Samsung Gear seemed to be positioned somewhere between the other systems. We ultimately chose the GoPro rig, partially because of the image quality it delivered, but also because its use coincided with a 'good' take.

The 'automatic' stitching of the different views provided by the Ricoh Theta S, Giroptic 360 and Samsung Gear 360 whilst acceptable, still gave rise to inconsistencies in the image, with broken or deformed continuities between views. There is software that can assist in the crafting of the best-fit stitching, e.g. Kolor's Autopano (Kolor n.d.)

and this was used (by necessity) with the 6 movies produced by the GoPro rig. Stitch-lines pose a challenge to set-design and direction: Can a scene be designed and the action directed to minimise actors crossing stitch-lines, and for scenery and props to be arranged so that the stitch-lines are not traversed? In retrospect, some initial test shots for each system would have minimised the discontinuities that arose, but the design and directorial issues in particular would require a good deal of additional planning and rehearsal time.

For sound, we set up four clip microphones concealed around the set and on the actors, feeding a F8 Zoom recorder (Zoom n.d.). Ultimately, we found that the mixed sound delivered by the GoPro cameras was adequate for our purposes.

As mentioned previously, ease of viewing and dissemination has been a key consideration for us in undertaking this project. Essentially, we looked at two solutions: use of a VR head mounted display (HMD), and the use of a smartphone mounted into a VR viewer. Initially we used the HMD Oculus Rift (Oculus n.d.), and the Unity3D games engine (Unity n.d.), to view the completed 360° video. This platform provided a good quality image, and readily offers the possibility of interaction and automated data gathering (e.g. diegetic control of playback, gaze tracking etc.). However, this means of viewing VR is relatively expensive (requiring a high-end PC as well as the HMD). Additionally, given our interest in dissemination, whilst the number of people using VR worldwide is increasing – an estimated 171 million in 2018, (Statista n.d.) – it has a considerably smaller user base than smartphone VR solutions (a potential 2.3 billion estimated in 2018, (Statista n.d.)). Accordingly, we have made versions of the test video to upload onto YouTube, which now enables users to upload 360° videos (YouTube n.d.). Once uploaded, the videos can be viewed on an internet connected smartphone using an affordable VR viewer (e.g. Google cardboard, (Google n.d.)). Furthermore, the

360° video can be viewed online, non-immersively without a viewer; the user can click and drag to rotate the spherically presented video. This versatility and ubiquity greatly improves audience reach.

### **Thoughts and findings subsequent to filming**

Placing of the audience at the centre of the action poses challenges with current technologies of consuming 360° VR dramas. There is an obvious similarity between the placing of the viewer at the centre of a traditional pictorial panorama, and the audience's POV in 360° VR. There are also obvious differences. A viewer standing in the centre of a traditional panorama can wander around, lean on the rails, take their time in considering every detail of the static painting surrounding them. What does one do when viewing the unfolding of a twenty-minute drama on a headset? The action is dynamic, and swirls around the viewer. Sometimes a dialogic exchange might take place with one character at one degree, and the other opposite them, with the viewer between. The viewer then has to decide who to look at, whether to follow the dialogue like a tennis match, switching between speakers or to stay with one character, only hearing the other. This is promising in terms of giving the audience a choice as to POV and also in encouraging multiple viewings. It also poses a physical challenge on the viewer – do they stand (the longer the drama, the longer they are standing), sit in a static chair (which could lead to a crick in the neck), or perhaps a swivel chair, which could lead to dizziness and enervation. Dooley notes that VR narratives have tended to be approximately ten minutes in length, due to the user experience of having on a headset. She is also concerned with associated health risks of longer form viewing of VR material, although parental advice from a games expert suggests that forty-five minutes of continuous VR exposure is fine, with five-to-ten-minute breaks (Robertson 2017). We had little issue in terms of physical side effects with viewing the twenty-minute

running time of *Fellow Creature* in single sittings.

The mechanism of viewing distracts the viewer from complete immersion in the drama; this is combined by the relative novelty of the VR experience, which is itself distracting. Theatre and film/TV screens have created a convention for the experience of drama which is not yet set within the practice of VR viewership. It therefore is my conclusion as a practitioner that there needs to be a slow feeding of very short dramatic experiences to VR audiences, to acclimatise them to consuming drama in this way. The potential, however, to immerse an audience in highly charged dramatic scenes involving intimate and high stakes exchanges is immense.

### **Reflections of a Theatre Practitioner**

As a practitioner, the writer/director has been keen to consider the potential of the medium for the dissemination of artistic outputs. A small-scale fringe theatre production is likely to reach at most a thousand people. Could VR technology offer small-scale theatre and performance makers an opportunity to reach larger or newer audiences? Might it be a way of introducing new audiences to the pleasures of small-scale theatre? Bakhshi and Throsby (2014) have found that the broadcast of live performances to cinemas has boosted ticket sales to mainstream, large-scale theatre productions. The British Royal National Theatre has invested in a VR studio to develop dramatic models for viewing in the 360° medium (Brown 2016). Of course, with its enormous public subsidy, ticket sales and private donations, the NT can afford top end quality equipment to offer viewers an experience which does not suffer in terms of quality of definition. For theatre-makers and other artists who do not receive such substantial amounts of money, there are few prosumer products able to produce images of the quality now expected by audiences. There are professional cameras or

alternatively there are consumer products which offer less than optimal resolution (The 360 Guy 2018). Only when the market offers affordable prosumer equipment will the ability to distribute HD 360° versions of their work become as available to less wealthy independent practitioners. This potential is also reliant on the widespread availability of VR viewing devices. Currently, approximately 6% of the UK population own such a device (Fedlman 2017). If the UK follows US trends, half of those users are gamers (Superdata 2017). The most that we could expect initially from the distribution of 360° fringe-type drama would be a cottage industry.

But has the medium the potential to work aesthetically for this kind of work? Our experience watching the test shoot of *Fellow Creature* shows that special qualities are potentially worth exploiting. In the theatre, the opening scene of the play involves the lights coming up on the figure of Raj, an attractive young man dressed in his underwear, waiting impatiently for something to happen. In VR, the viewer explores the environment of the set, and discovers Raj sitting there. The figure of Raj is only visible if the viewer decides consciously to keep looking in this direction. Partly this decision is made for the viewer as, at this point, nothing else is happening on the threadbare set. But still, the viewer's attention to their own position as Bentley's peeping tom is compounded by the consciousness that you could turn and look away. Later in the play, the still half-dressed Raj walks about the set, sometimes passing virtually very close to the viewer. At the climax, a conscious choice has to be made to watch the men writhing together on the bed or turn away. The sense of Scopophilic voyeurism is tremendously increased. The latent tendency of the medium (unlike conventional theatre) to be experienced on one's own in private with a headset brings into play the possibility that the experience could tip into one of the least respectable kinds of voyeurism, 'Pathological', in which the activity becomes actively charged and acts of self-

pleasuring ensue (Rodosthenous 2015, 8). The appeal of the medium to artists and practitioners who want to play these kinds of games of desire with the viewer is clear. How appropriate that a medium which is so based in gaming should afford artists these kinds of ludic possibilities.

*Fellow Creature* is more than the sum of its erotic potential. The substance of the play is an argument about the ethics of doing business in a society which allows its most vulnerable members to quite literally die on the streets. The communal experience of theatre has traditionally encouraged its audience to consider ethical, social, and political issues as part of the social experience of going to see a play. Playwrights make conscious use of this tradition in their dramaturgy. For example, in his play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1990), the playwright/poet Tony Harrison directly addresses the ethics of a National Theatre/Southbank audience member enjoying performances of drama or classical music, then making their way through the then contemporary so-called 'Cardboard City', a homeless enclave that existed in the pedestrian subways beneath the Waterloo roundabout at the time of the play's premier production at the National. The audience, in this case, is collectively interrogated by the words spoken by the actor on the Olivier stage, and the play presumes that each member of the audience can be cast as a member of a class in the financial or social position to be able to do something about the issue of homelessness. In the case of the VR viewer, alone experiencing a play on VR equipment, this casting of the audience/viewer could seem more presumptuous. The playwright Howard Barker has problematised the view of theatre as a collective ethical experience, instead arguing for the theatre experience being one in which the audience member can 'fracture himself from the collectivity of the audience, and respond personally to what is going on the stage' (Brown 2011, 116). When the consideration of ethical issues is combined with erotic and/or symbolic

material, the individual experience is less akin to attending to a debate than in surrendering to a dream. Campbell (1949) held that dreams are personalised myths, and for something to become personalised, individuation from the collective is required. *Fellow Creature* sees Raj, as a part of his seduction of Eric, near hypnotise the older man into thinking of himself as a king who has Raj as his beautiful prince. Raj hymns the goddess Kali, the mad mother of the Hindu pantheon, and conjures up a vision of the goddess taking and giving whilst he writhes on the bed with Eric, bringing the older man to orgasm. This moment of the play is deliberately strange and hallucinogenic. Actors playing Raj have lolled their tongue to appear as if they are possessed by the goddess herself, usually depicted as poking out her tongue. This kind of deliberately strange moment is designed to encourage the audience member to experience something akin to an oneiric state. Sitting on one's own viewing in a VR environment will only encourage this, given the intrinsically dreamlike quality of the VR experience (McNamara 2017). This holds great promise for any theatre artist looking to create the type of theatre of dreams which the playwright David Rudkin describes in an interview from the early 1970s, as an experience of a 'dreamer's predicament' (Vinston 1973, 653–654). How any particular viewer responds to or interprets the dream will depend on his or her own individuality. Giannachi (2004) concludes that VR is the site of ethics and politics but that it is also, as per the theatre envisioned by Barker and Rudkin, personal and oneiric.

Lastly, *Fellow Creature* is a play in which people talk about their most private, personal experiences. In describing his feelings after seeing the dying man, Eric recounts witnessing his father's death. The actor here has an opportunity to present to the audience a man who is excavating deep within himself. The emotion is raw. This performing of very personal, confessional material is a staple of theatre performances. It



is no coincidence that the play most often talked about as the greatest in English, Hamlet, is also known for those soliloquies wherein the title character bares his soul. In studio theatres, we are able to see these confessional moments at very close quarters. The drawing in of the theatre audience at these moments, to look as if into a character's soul, has been transformed by recorded media into the popular close-up of television and cinema. The director Katie Mitchell has used a technique in her theatre productions which blends live theatre with in-the-moment filmed extracts which allows for cinematic close-ups to be embedded within the experience of live performance (Jefferies and Papadaki 2012). The VR world offers another medium in which we can get up close and personal with human beings in their moments of soul-searching, emotional turmoil, terror, and joy. This striving for immersion in a momentary experience of intimacy is identified by Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan (2012) as a key requirement for contemporary audiences and viewers. Though the static camera in the centre of the action preserves a theatrical distance from the actor when such moments are choreographed away from the centre, it is possible as Vlaanderen notes, to have directors and performers create a VR version of the close-up by increasing the character's proximity to the camera. The camera, of course, need not be static. We attempted one take of *Fellow Creature* with a camera placed on one of the actor's foreheads. A VR drama might give the audience the opportunity to switch between viewpoints, static or a particular character's point of view. A dialogue or action between two characters can be experienced in P.O.V. and close range, with the other character seen up close and personal. In this case, the audience is virtually in the scene. The camera, as Deleuze (1992) extensively explored, can take any number of free-floating viewpoints. VR allows viewers to choose from as many points of view as the makers film.

## Conclusions

The overarching feeling produced for us by experiencing the drama of *Fellow Creature* filmed in VR by a static camera was that of being an invisible observer of a private scene. This mirrors the traditional theatrical audience experience. The audience member watching a non-participatory play is never ‘in’ the play, nor is their presence usually acknowledged by the play. This is in contrast to the conventions of the VR experience, where viewers are often placed in the scene as an active participant. This is also a convention of immersive theatre, which Alston (2016) identifies as a contrasting feature of immersive performances in comparison to more conventional theatre events. The interactive narrative possibilities afforded by VR have been extensively formally explored, for example, Laurel (2013) and Murray (1997), as well as in popular culture, for example, Cline (2011).

Newton and Soukup (2016) explore how the invisibility of the observer can create feelings of voyeurism, vulnerability, and uneasiness at not having a defined role to play when immersed in the VR experience. Our casting of the viewer as an invisible, unnamed, unidentified presence in the room whilst Raj and Eric’s drama unfolds might well excite such feelings. We would welcome this unease as a part of the aesthetic experience of viewing the play. The viewer's inability to take agency and intervene in the drama is an apt metaphor for Eric's somewhat impotent feeling of having to do something about the poverty he has encountered in the real world outside his hotel. The viewer is both immersed virtually in the hotel room and metaphorically in a virtual experience which intrinsically cocoons them from the real world as much as Eric's and Raj's hotel room does for them in relation to Kolkata and its poverties. Consciousness of the unease created by passive and even voyeuristic viewing may well inform our and others’ further experimentations with the medium. This links with Bentley’s and

Rodosthenous's affirmations of the voyeuristic nature of theatre. Invisibility becomes a positive and active ingredient of the event of watching drama in VR.

Dreams of invisibility have long haunted humanity. In the second book of *The Republic*, Glaucon tells the story of the shepherd Gyges, who discovers a ring that can make him invisible and who then uses it to gain power and wealth through unjust means. Who would not be unjust if they thought they would be undetected? Glaucon posits that it would be impossible to have this power and not use it either for wrong or for touching what does not belong to you. In virtually all stories in which humans become invisible, the power is used for ill. From the magical, invisibility-inducing helmet Tarnhelm used for nefarious purposes by Alberich in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, to the title character of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* and its various cinematic offspring, invisibility offers opportunities to pursue selfish and evil ends. The aspect of voyeurism in the VR version of *Fellow Creature* brings into play the notion of touching things which do not belong to the viewer. This points towards Dixon's dreaded VR porn dystopia. But the voyeurism of *Fellow Creature* is part of a basket of affects and purposes. In watching the drama as an invisible presence, the viewer can consider the meanings and implications of the scene in which they lurk. We move away from the fields of pornography and avaricious desire, towards art's abilities to encourage those encountering it to think, to feel, to consider, to empathise, and to wrestle with the existential problems of human life. In *De Officiis*, Cicero refers to Plato's use of the story of Gyges and suggests that a good person would not use invisibility to wreak evil, as they possess moral rectitude. We do not have to accept Cicero's neat division of humanity into those with moral rectitude or without to see that VR offers us a means of invisibility which can be used for the creative and democratic purposes of art.

1. The test shoot can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcSQkr7j\\_fs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcSQkr7j_fs)

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